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ABSTRACT

A study examined mass media use and ability to predict public support for two heavily publicized Florida referenda--casino gambling and a statewide lottery. It was hypothesized that (1) voters who read newspapers that publish election public opinion poll stories will be better able to predict support for the issues than voters who rely on friends and family for election information, and (2) voters who rely on mass media (other than newspapers) for election information will be less able to predict support for the issues than voters who rely on newspapers but more able to do so than those who rely on friends or family. Subjects, 666 individuals from all over the state, were surveyed by telephone two weeks before the November 4, 1986, election. Neither hypothesis was supported by the data collected. Results indicated that it was impossible to say why some respondents more accurately predicted support for the two referenda, but that some evidence existed implying that patterns of media use were not a factor. Examination of the data did not reveal whether respondents read or watched poll stories, whether they saw them and forgot them, whether they ignored them, or whether they simply did not believe them. Results may also suggest to editors that reader interest may not be sufficient justification for conducting and reporting public opinion polls. (Tables of data and references are appended.) (NKA)

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NEWSPAPER READERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL ESTIMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION
DO PEOPLE PAY ATTENTION TO POLL STORIES?

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ABSTRACT

Two primary models address how individuals use public opinion in attitude formation -- pluralistic ignorance and the spiral of silence. However, neither model has much data support on the role of mass media in individual attitude formation about public opinion. Several studies have shown that individual frequently ignore news stories about public opinion. Others have shown that individuals heavily mediate news messages with their own opinions or those of significant others. The present study examined mass media use and ability to predict public support for two heavily publicized Florida referenda -- casino gambling and a statewide lottery. The study tested two hypotheses: 1) Voters who read newspapers that publish election poll stories will be better able to predict support for the issues than voters who rely on friends and family for election information; 2) Voters who rely on mass media other than newspapers, but better able to predict support than voters who rely on friends and family. Neither hypothesis was supported. Further research should concentrate more specifically on respondents' use of mass media in attitude formation, especially their reliance on poll reporting vs. other methods of information seeking.

Introduction

Public opinion polling by newspapers, especially before elections, has emerged as one of the most significant developments of print journalism in the 1980s. In Florida, for example, virtually every daily newspaper in the state conducted, commissioned or agreed to co-fund pre-election polls in 1986. To be sure, the November 1986 election was important to Floridians, with a U.S. Senate seat, the governorship and two gambling referenda on the ballot. On the other hand, the newspapers showed a willingness to spend significant amounts of limited revenues to sample voter attitudes in a non-Presidential election year. Clearly, polls are considered good business.

Even more, they are considered good copy. Having invested in public opinion polling, newspapers are using polls for more than gauging how elections should be covered. Public opinion itself, although its definition in the research literature remains fuzzy, has become news, and readers have become sources for stories. At least where poll reporting is concerned, news has become less a compendium of current events and more a family photo album, a series of snapshots of its audience.

The popularity of newspaper public opinion polling has increased contemporaneously with, but probably distinct from, the evolution of theoretical models that attempt to explain how the public uses public opinion. A critical

component of these models is the question of how mass media affect opinion formation: How do people use mass media treatment of public opinion in forming their own opinions? To a newspaper, the question can be put more practically: Does anybody read poll stories? Related questions become apparent immediately: Do readers accurately interpret poll results? Do they believe them? If the answer to either question is no, what constraints operate on their perceptions of poll stories? This paper will address those questions with a discussion of existing research literature and an analysis of a pre-election poll that sought voter attitudes on two referenda on Florida's November 1986 ballot.

Background

Before attempting a more theoretical discussion, a brief review of one study in particular may add a practical perspective. In a survey of newspaper readers in Kentucky, Paterson, Tipton and Fielder (1977) found that fewer than one-fourth had read even one of three poll stories about which the survey was concerned. Of those who did, the authors found, "Those whose opinions agreed with the poll results were more apt to find the results credible than those who disagreed." Readers of poll stories also were more likely to be persons who already held an opinion on the issue in the poll. And respondents likely to be acquainted with poll results were more likely to

hold opinions consistent with persons like themselves. Rather than hew to the pure majority on an issue, they sided with subgroups with which they identified. That finding will be compared with others in the research literature elsewhere in this paper.

The authors' findings indicated a limited effect of poll stories on attitude formation for two reasons -- low attention, and pre-existing opinions. Respondents tended to believe only those poll results that supported their existing opinions. And the need for cognitive consistency between the individual and the group with which he or she identified seemed to mitigate the effect of poll stories on attitude change. The authors did find that polls may carry more weight with readers when used by those who are uninformed about a particular issue. Polls that reported opinions of significant subgroups acted as a "short cut" for readers who identified with those subgroups and were seeking information about alternatives on an issue.

The findings of Patterson et al. are consistent with several earlier studies of balance theory (see Atkin, 1969, for example) and the impact of subgroups on attitude formation. They also appear to agree with more recent findings in the emerging literature on cognitive theory in communication. As early as 1940, Gallup and Rae cautioned that "the urge to follow the majority...must be interpreted to mean not the opinion of the nation as a whole, but rather the small intimate

group who make up the individual voter's circumscribed universe." Tichenor and Wackman (1973) found that subjects attempting to predict majority opinion were most likely to rely on interpersonal communication, not media use. Indeed, 66 percent of their respondents said they did not know what the majority opinion was in their community. Lau and Sears (1986), Hastie (1986), Millar and Tesser (1986), Johnston (1986) and others have found that opinion formation is rooted in pre-existing orientations -- schema in the parlance of cognitive theory -- that guide voter processing of information about candidates and issues. Lau and Sears found that the major determinant of selectivity of messages is the structure of previously stored knowledge about the world. They also found that almost all political perception takes place in a social setting. Mediated information is frequently attended to in a social setting, so the potential influence of others on the reception of the message is strong. Their results argue for the dominance not only of pre-existing beliefs but also of the opinions of significant others.

Other findings in the research literature regarding attitude formation, attitude consistency and mass media impact likewise show little support for a pervasive influence of poll reporting on attitude formation. Billingsley and Ferber (1981) found that electoral competence as measured by the relationship between patterns of issue orientations and voting behavior was largely dependent upon the nature of the election. The authors found that the liberal-conser-

vative continuum provided the only apparent ideological structure to American politics. Other researchers (Hamill, Lodge and Blake, 1985; Miller and Wattenberg, 1984) have found class schema or religious beliefs driving issue orientations. But the importance of subgroups in mediating mass media information is apparent in all the studies.

In a study of the 1976 Presidential election, Roberts (1979) did find that media use helped respondents discriminate between candidates and facilitated decision-making about voting. In the early stages of the campaign, attention to media, especially newspapers, accelerated the development of distinct attitudes about the candidates. But the author was unable to establish causality. Roberts also found that the late deciders and those with marginal interest were likely to use media messages as a catalyst to seek out more interpersonal contacts in the final days of the campaign.

The two dominant models of the role of public opinion in attitude formation remain the spiral of silence and pluralistic ignorance. Both wrestle with the influence of mass media, including poll reporting, in attitude formation. A brief summary of each model is in order.

The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1973, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1984) offers as its central hypothesis that an individual's fear of isolation is more compelling than his or her own judgments. The individual constantly surveys his or her environment, using interpersonal communication and mass media, to determine whether his or her opinion is in the minor-

ity. The mass media, Noelle-Neumann offers, exert strong influence by portraying the opinion environment as essentially consonant. The preponderance of one opinion will cause individuals holding dissenting opinions to suppress their opinions out of fear of isolation. Because the majority expresses itself and the minority eventually becomes silent, individuals are faced more and more with one viewpoint, contributing to the spiral of silence.

Obviously, the mass media play a crucial role in Noelle-Neumann's construct. Their role is seen primarily as agenda-setting, bestowing prestige and credibility on certain groups and opinions.

Salmon and Kline (1983) find roots for Noelle-Neumann's ideas in several earlier works, beginning with Allport's (1937) "circularity of reinforcement" hypothesis. Similarly, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) predict the impact of totalitarian control of communication even on so-called hardcore opinion holders. But Salmon and Kline take issue with Noelle-Neumann's hypotheses on several grounds.

First, from a research standpoint, they point out that a number of attempts to replicate her research have had mixed success at best (see Glynn and McLeod, 1982; Glynn and McLeod, 1984; Taylor, 1982; and others). Further, in the literature on conformity that apparently underlies much of Noelle-Neumann's hypotheses, they find limited support for the spiral of silence. In the classic experiments by Solomon Asch (1951), seven confederates would agree on a

clearly wrong choice in a simple discrimination task, while the subject of the experiment made the same discrimination. While Asch found strong evidence that certain subjects will agree with the majority even though the majority choice is clearly wrong, he also found that one-fourth of all subjects were completely independent of majority pressure. No subject conformed on every trial. Asch subsequently found that if a subject had some support from anyone in the group, conformity to the majority dropped substantially.

Salmon and Kline also cite Crutchfield's (1955) finding that pressure to conform declines when subjects are not face-to-face with group members, and Argyle's (1957) conclusion that pressure to conform declines when group scrutiny declines. In addition, they cite the research literature showing the powerful influence of subgroups in mediating mass media effects.

Predicting what has become a common reservation about Noelle-Neumann's work, Salmon and Kline cite studies showing that conformity appears to vary across cultures. Glynn and McLeod, replicating Noelle-Neumann's work in a study of the 1976 Presidential election, found that expectation of who would win was a significant predictor of voter preference. But the authors could not determine the direction of the causality. The question of whether the individual backs a winner to avoid negative sanctions -- Noelle-Neumann's hypothesis -- simply wants to back a winner -- the so-called bandwagon effect -- or projects his or her preference into the winner's circle, remains unanswered.

Even if conclusive evidence can be found for the spiral of silence, Noelle-Neumann herself discounts the impact of publication of public opinion poll results on individual attitude formation. The influence of mass media, she offers, is primarily through agenda-setting.

Salmon and Kline conclude that what drives individual perception of public opinion is not the spiral of silence but projection. Noelle-Neumann's causality is thus turned around. Instead of the individual's perception of the climate of public opinion forming or altering his or her own attitude, the individual's existing opinion helps form his or her perception of the climate of public opinion. Their conclusions appear consistent with research findings of cognitive schema theorists (Lau and Sears and others, cited previously).

In his work on balance theory, Atkin (1969) did find that individuals will alter their voting intent when supplied with new information about support for a candidate or issue, provided the support is from a relevant (to the individual) reference public. Atkin saw the individual's need for cognitive balance as the driving force. Again, though, Atkin's work appears to show more influence of significant subgroups than of mass media in individual attitude formation.

The second primary model of the impact of public

opinion on individuals -- pluralistic ignorance -- appears by definition to support the low impact of poll reporting on individual attitudes. Pluralistic ignorance hypothesizes that majorities will frequently perceive themselves to be in a minority and minorities will perceive themselves as a majority. Indeed, there is evidence for a causal role of mass media in such misperceptions. Tipton and Fielder (1978) found that in a community in which pornography was illegal, and the voices represented in newspaper stories were ministers opposed to pornography, polls showed that an 82-percent majority that did not think pornography should be banned perceived itself to be a 39-percent minority. The authors concluded that mass media may have been responsible for the misperceptions by giving undue exposure to minority opinions. But the distinction between poll stories and other stories is obvious. If respondents had read and believed poll stories, the misperception presumably would not have occurred. Nor do the authors' findings necessarily reject the role of projection and significant subgroups on individual attitude formation.

Other findings in the literature appear not to support either the spiral of silence or pluralistic ignorance. Saltiel and Woelfel (1975) found that the stability of an attitude is dependent upon the number of messages out

of which the attitude was formed. They found that attitude change over time was independent of the homogeneity or heterogeneity of information about the attitude that the individual had received. They found that the quantity of information an individual received was at least as important as its quality or source. Hurley and Hill (1980) found only modest convergence between preferences of individual citizens and their representatives' voting behavior, which appears to argue for low exposure to media messages about those representatives. Both studies seem to support a more cognitive view emphasizing the role of pre-existing orientations -- schema -- in attitude formation or change.

Obviously, it is a leap of faith to generalize from research on media impact on voting intent and behavior in specific elections to interest in and readership of public opinion poll stories. But clearly, there is no consistent evidence in the literature for either high attention to poll stories or belief in them. What remains is to test that absence of evidence fairly by assuming that poll stories are attended to, believed, and effective in helping readers accurately gauge public support for an issue. Those propositions can be tested by focusing on evidence for individuals mediating mass media messages with the opinions of their peer groups or their own pre-existing opinions. We may also find evidence by assuming that individuals who depend on newspapers for election information are better predictors than individuals who depend on other media that don't give

as much -- or any -- prominence to poll stories. Florida's 1986 election allows the proposition to be tested on two issues: referenda on casino gambling and a statewide lottery. Because virtually every daily newspaper in the state gave prominence to stories throughout the election campaign showing public opinion on the two issues, the impact of those stories on readers' accuracy in predicting support for the two issues should submit to field testing.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis I

Respondents who rely for election information primarily on daily newspapers will show significantly more accuracy in estimating support for casinos and a statewide lottery than respondents who rely primarily on family and friends for their information.

Hypothesis II

Respondents who rely primarily on sources other than newspapers or friends and family for election information will estimate support for casinos and a statewide lottery less accurately than respondents who rely on newspapers, and more accurately than respondents who rely on friends and family.

Methodology

Data for this study came from a statewide survey conducted by the University of Florida's Communication Research Center on Oct. 15-20, 1986 (N = 666). Additional data came from earlier surveys done by the CRC in May and August (see Tables 2 and 3). The survey was completed two weeks before the Nov. 4 election. The survey used

random-digit dialing samples purchased from Survey Systems Inc. Data collection and entry were done by interviewers and coders trained and supervised by the CRC. Area codes and prefixes were programmed in proportion to the estimated number of residential telephone numbers in Florida. The last four digits of telephone numbers were randomly generated, and results were checked against a list of business telephone numbers to eliminate non-residential numbers. All interviewers completed a two-hour training session in survey procedures and techniques. A poll supervisor was present at all times during interviewing. The average time to complete an interview was 15 minutes. The margin of error for the resulting data is 4 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups may be higher.

Among its 69 questions, the survey asked respondents if they favored a statewide lottery and local-option voting on casinos. Respondents were asked to estimate support for the lottery and for casino gambling. They were also asked where they get the information they rely on in their voting decisions. (See Table 1 for exact wording of the questions.)

Predictions of support for the two issues were compared to the survey's finding of voter support for the issues in May, August and October.

Results

Neither hypothesis was supported by the data (See Table 2). Respondents who relied primarily on newspapers for their election information did not differ significantly from those who depended on television, friends and family, or a combination of newspapers and television in their ability to predict support for the lottery and casino referenda. Predictions of support, expressed as the mean of all predictions for a particular group, tended to underestimate support for a statewide lottery and overestimate support for casino gambling. The results did not differ significantly when respondents were categorized by which source would have the most impact on their voting decisions (see Table 3, and question 38 in Table 1).

There are, however, slight indications that newspaper-dependent respondents who do read poll stories are better able to predict support for an issue. Fourteen newspaper-dependent respondents estimated support for the lottery at 60 percent -- virtually identical to the actual support -- and 24 respondents who depended on both newspapers and television estimated 60-percent support. The same measure -- the mode -- for television-dependent respondents was 40 percent (see Table 2).

But in the support-for-casino predictions, modes for newspaper-dependent, television-dependent and friends- and family-dependent respondents were substantially higher

than actual support for casinos. Only respondents who depended on newspapers and television showed a mode close to the actual support. Similarly, 31 of the respondents who said newspapers influence them most in the voting booth estimated support for lotteries at 60 percent. Respondents in all media-influence categories over-estimated support for casinos, a result that echoes over-estimates in the media-dependency categories. The over-estimates of support for casinos tempers the temptation to attribute accurate predictions by some respondents to reading of poll stories. If the source of the respondents' accuracy was careful attention to poll stories, they would be expected to show similar accuracy in estimating support for casinos. Indeed, modes of 50 percent in several categories may indicate that numerous respondents were hazarding pure guesses. Even for those who weren't, the evidence suggests that they are not basing their predictions on poll stories: When the 50-percent "guesses" were eliminated, means in every category were not significantly affected. When examined with high standard deviations, this result indicates that predictions varied widely and were not based on any single rationale, such as poll results.

Discussion

It seems safe to say we cannot reject the null hypothesis. We cannot say why some respondents more accurately predicted support for the two referenda, but we have some evidence that patterns of media use were not a factor. It is impossible to tell from this database whether respondents read or watch poll stories, whet

they attend to them and then forget what was reported, whether they ignore them, or whether they simply do not believe them. Respondents in the CRC survey were not asked those questions. What the data may show researchers is that the impact of poll stories on individual perceptions of public opinion is hardly direct and easily detectible. What the data may indicate to editors is that reader interest may not be sufficient justification for conducting and reporting public opinion polls.

Conclusion

Readers of daily newspapers in Florida had ample opportunity to study public opinion poll stories in the months before the November 1986 election. In all likelihood, they will see poll stories become a staple of their daily newspapers for years to come. Whether the increasing frequency and prominence of those stories acts to enhance interest in them by familiarizing readers remains to be seen, and is certainly arguable.

For the moment, however, their popularity, credibility, understandability and influence among readers is suspect. Whether mass communication theorists and researchers subscribe to the spiral of silence, pluralistic ignorance, or neither model, the question of the nature and extent of mass media influence on individual attitude formation remains unanswered; indeed, only poorly

explored.

The need for further research is so apparent as to nearly obviate suggestion. Both field and laboratory studies should explore whether individuals read, watch or listen to poll stories in whatever mass medium they depend on. The credibility individuals give poll stories should also be measured, as well as individuals' recall of them. In addition, the extent to which individuals understand the so-called "caveats" of poll stories -- confidence interval and margin of error -- should be explored. The fact that many mass media do not include those caveats in poll stories indicates another area where research is needed: How do mass media report public opinion polls? Is any attempt made to discriminate between "good" polls and bad, either in selection for publication or in the way they are reported?

If the impact of mass media on public opinion and individual attitudes remains a mystery to researchers, the impact of public opinion and individual attitudes on mass media is no less so. Public opinion polls have become news even before we have learned to define what public opinion is. A concept that remains imperfectly defined will remain imperfectly reported. A public that must rely on imperfect reporting will remain imperfectly understood, by its members and by those who profess to report on it. Rather than a spiral of silence, the society and its members will fall victim to a

spiral of noise.

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TABLE NO. 1

SURVEY QUESTIONS

37.* Where do you get your information for the decisions you make when you go to the election booth? -- from newspapers, from television, from radio, from your political party or from friends and family?

38. What do you think will have the greatest effect in the decisions you make in the voting booth -- information you get from newspapers, from television, from radio, from your political party or from friends and family?

46. Do you favor a state-run lottery designed to help fund public education?

47. What percentage of the voters would you guess will vote for the lottery in the November 4th election?

48. Do you favor casino gambling in counties that choose to have it?

49. What percentage of the voters would you guess will vote for casino gambling in the November 4th election?

* The questions for the present study were among 69 asked of respondents in a statewide poll (N=666) conducted by the University of Florida's Communication Research Center.

TABLE NO. 2

VOTER ESTIMATES OF SUPPORT FOR CASINOS & LOTTERY

BY MEDIA USE

47. What percentage of the voters would you guess will vote for the lottery in the November 4th election?

User of:*	Estimated vote for lottery: (mean percentage)
Newspapers (cases = 77)	53.1 (mode = 60)
Television (cases = 54)	49.3 (mode = 40)
Friends and Family (cases = 26)	48.9 (mode = 40)
Newspapers & Television (cases = 172)	53.1 (mode = 50)
Actual support for lottery:**	
May (N = 640)	63.1
August (N = 659)	60.4
October (N = 666)	60.4

49. What percentage of the voters would you guess will vote for casino gambling in the November 4th election?

User of:*	Estimated vote for casinos: (mean percentage)
Newspapers	40.4 (mode = 50)
Television	43 (mode = 50)
Friends and Family	37.3 (mode = 40)
Newspapers & Television	37.3 (mode = 30)

TABLE NO. 2 cont'd.

Actual support for casinos:**	
May (N=640)	35.2
August (N=659)	30.4
October (N=666)	27.9

* Other media use categories have been deleted because of insufficient cases.

** Figures from University of Florida Communications Research Center surveys of registered voters in Florida.

TABLE NO. 3

VOTER ESTIMATES OF SUPPORT FOR CASINOS & LOTTERY

BY MEDIA EFFECT

47. What percentage of the voters would you guess will vote for the lottery in the November 4th election?

Voting decision affected most by:*	Estimated vote for lottery: (mean percentage)
Newspapers (cases = 162)	52 (mode = 60)
Television (cases = 117)	53.4 (mode = 50)
Friends and Family (cases = 54)	48.4 (mode = 40)
Newspapers & Television (cases = 93)	52.5 (mode = 60)
Actual support for lottery:**	
May (N = 640)	63.1
August (N = 659)	60.4
October (N = 666)	60.4

49. What percentage of the voters would you guess will vote for casino gambling in the November 4th election?

Voting decision affected most by:	Estimated vote for casinos: (mean percentage)
Newspapers	38.7 (mode = 50)
Television	37.9 (mode = 40)
Friends and Family	38.7 (mode = 40)
Newspapers & Television	38.4 (mode = 30)

TABLE NO. 3 cont'd.

Actual support for casinos:**	
May (N = 640)	35.2
August (N = 659)	30.4
October (N = 666)	27.9

* Other media effect categories have been deleted because of insufficient cases.

** Figures from University of Florida Communication Research Center surveys of registered voters in Florida.

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